

JEAN BRETON

THREE DAYS IN RECONQUERED ALSACE



LIBRAIRIE BERGER-LEVRAULT
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IN

RECONQUERED ALSACE

Three days in Alsace ; it is ten times less without doubt than would be needed to understand the land, its worth, and its wishes.

Three days, a run in a motor-car with a few Americans, up hill and down dale, through forests and meadows, towns and hamlets ; speeding along with the country-side flashing by as if seen on the screen of a cinematograph, which is sometimes a cause of pain. So many people, so many things would hold one back ; but one has to drag oneself away. Good-bye follows hard after the greeting.

And yet I would not give for all the gold in the world the memory of the flyin gglimpes I caught. And I should like all my friends to enjoy the magnificent privilege which has fallen to my lot. Those three days did not only delight us : they edified us in every way.

Our first impression — shall I say it ? — is one of beauty. Down the winding road our Engineers — worthy successors of the intendants of Louis XIV — have opened up through the woods, we come to a land where Pain has had her home. For forty-four years, under the heavy hand of the invader, people have chafed and swallowed their anger, and hidden their sorrow. Life here, in one's own land, has been as it were an

exile. Nearly all those homes, whose chimneys we see smoking above the long roofs, have witnessed the most poignant woe. And now, by the will of those same Germans, hundreds of thousands of men are rushing madly from the East and the West to throw themselves upon each other once more in those same valleys. Here it is that the nations rise up against each other like furious waves, and fall down upon each other. This is the most tortured of all lands, bedewed more than any other with tears and blood.

But it is clothed in such beauty, at once so rich and so delicate, that we stand speechless a moment. Our eyes feast on those forests of pines and beeches which cover the red earth as it were with a velvet garment of two shades of green, on the gleaming water that dances and sings between the grey rocks it has polished, amidst the serried ranks of the fox-gloves, and then on all the orchards that stand out on the level stretches of the winding valleys, and sparkle like so many jewels in the meadows. It is impossible to resist the witchery. And one of our travelling companions, as he plucks golden plums, cannot help crying : « Leave such a lovely land to those beastly Boches ? Never ! »

But smiling as this land is, rich as are the treasures it contains, we are not here in answer to its call. We have not come for the pines, the hops, or the vines, nor even for the iron and the potassium ; we are searching for the souls of men.

And during these days, are they not easy to find ? For now the anniversaries of the days of deliverance have come round. Joy comes to meet us in the way, joy clad in a red skirt and a big black bow. Each village celebrates with scrupulous exactitude the day when it saw the soldiers it had so long waited for, the soldiers of France, come back again. The firemen put on their helmets for the march past, and the notables their silk hats to honour the tricolor flag. The band of the Chasseurs plays stirring airs in the old square with its low squat houses. A general comes, kisses the Alsatian women in their

old-time finery, and reminds them that « it is for good and all, for ever ». And if he is a son of the soil, if he mingles some good old Alsatian insult against the Boche with his French speech, then everyone goes wild.

All evening round the big pots of beer or the round glasses of golden wine, the memories of the great day, whence the new era is to be counted, unloose men's tongues, and thrill their hearts again.

We are billeted in the house of a native of the place. In such and such a little town frequently visited on account of its situation, the habitants would certainly be within their rights in being weary of visitors. They have too many people to put up. They hang flags out of their windows so often. They are, in a word, a little too often called on to take part in the show.

But our charming hostess does not evince the slightest trace of this very natural feeling, if she has it at all. With unwearying kindness, she relates to the passer-by with what surprise, as it were, stronger than joy, the Alsations were seized, and, so to say, struck dumb, when they saw the little Chasseurs of the Vosges bounding down through the well-known forests. « We were practically mad, and couldn't believe our eyes. We have lost the habit of breathing freely. » And with what a tone she adds, as her thoughts hark back to the « diables bleus », the sons of the mountain, whose legendary prowess has so long filled the Alsatian with joy and the Boche with terror : « How we shall have to reward them when they come back, those of them who come back... »

To measure the intensity of the feeling for France in Alsace, we have something else than anniversaries ; we carry it with us : it is the announcement of a victory.

Our troops have just pushed the enemy back once more. They have decidedly got the upper hand. The news is brought by our motor to the villages of Alsace. We give out all the

Paris papers we have left, and the officers who are with us add all the details they can.

What a glow there is upon the faces of the people who listen to us ! An Alsatian village is decidedly a first-rate place for enjoying a French victory. In these valleys, it is not only the roar of the cannon that increases in strength, but our emotions as well, our anxiety like our hope.

If the Germans gain ground anywhere, the inhabitants of the reconquered part of Alsace gather round our soldiers, so to say, like sheep around the shepherd when the storm draws near. And though no word be said, in the women's eyes it is easy to read the horrible thought of evil days : « If ever they should come back... »

But if the wind shifts, and our armies show their mettle, what a relief it is, how every heart thrills with joy ! The delivered villages are counted up. « Still another where the Boche will no longer be master ! Still another where his hand will no more be heavy on people as it was so long upon us ! » The delivered Alsatian feels especial pity for all those whose homes have been invaded : is he not their elder brother ?

And then, he can imagine better than anyone the consternation that the news of our victory will spread over there beyond the great river that flows on the horizon.

He has seen the Prussian officers go up and down the street, making everyone give them the wall. He knows what their pride is. He knows too what faith they have been able to instil into the German people : faith in the « invincible army » that the Kaiser calls *his* army.

This faith is the Hohenzollern's last card ; he who shakes this faith, tears this card across. And then perhaps the collapse, which will be the liberation of the world as well, is close at hand.

That is what people say in Alsace. It is the keenest of joys to hear it said here, with the Alsatian accent.

Another ceremony had taken place before the anniversaries in the towns and villages through which we pass, and it too had left a thrill of pride and love; it was prize-giving in the schools which for close on four years have been French schools once more.

The prelude to it was our soldiers' march into Alsace. But the conquest of the little hearts of Alsace by the French language is perhaps what gives best here an impression of irrevocability.

The people of Alsace certainly did not need to know French to love France. They have given sufficient proof of it. And this obstinate attachment which broke down every barrier, including that of language, was doubly touching.

But who doubts that fusion is easier when a common tongue is spoken? In 1860, Campeaux, Inspecteur d'Académie du Haut-Rhin, said to the students of the normal school of Colmar: « To teach French is to teach what France is, for she has put her very soul into her language. »

The little Alsatians of 1914 have instinctively understood that. They have opened their ears avidly to the teaching of our soldier-teachers. And there they are in the street, as proud as Punch to be able to talk French with the Frenchman who happens to pass, and happy to show him the little red gilt-edged book which will recall a great day in the annals of the delivered family.

That teaching has been wonderfully successful here. Last year 520 children passed their Certificat d'Études Primaires, and 16 took their Brevet Élémentaire. This year there are 37 Brevets and 726 Certificats.

Grown-up people as well have not been too proud to vie with the children in swelling the ranks of the learners. We were told of two working-girls, who, when their day's work was over, patiently went to the French class. They show their diplomas to-day with legitimate pride.

The retreat from Mulhouse had, it must be admitted, left a rankling wound in the memory of our army. Many of our soldiers had on the whole brought back from Alsace a somewhat confused impression. First of all, not being fully aware of the situation of the country (following too closely perhaps Gambetta's advice, we had not spoken sufficiently of it), they were astonished to find so many people there who did not understand them. And then, they said : « When we left, they fired out of the windows at us from behind. » They forgot the German immigrants settled in Alsace, they knew nothing of the German soldiers who dressed in plain clothes — we have since had proof of it — to fire on the French soldiers out of the windows.

To-day, every misunderstanding has long since been dissipated. The troops sent into Alsace swear that it is the best of sectors, not merely because for some time past it has been relatively quiet, which is always a good thing, but because everyone feels there, more or less confusedly, the sweetness of this free life that is once more awakening. It calls to mind a flower that, but a short time ago faded and withered, suddenly unfolds its leaves as the cool water reaches its roots, blooms, and gives out its sweetness.

To welcome our soldiers, the Alsatians stay on in their long-roofed houses as long as they can. But though the sector is a quiet one, it is not always thoroughly safe. At times a cruel idea comes into the Boche's head. In a little town in a valley, where there in a lovely church whose spire rises upwards like the pistil of a flower, a sudden bombardment made so many victims one day that a poor fellow was obliged to carry his wife to the cemetery in a shroud, for there were not coffins enough. Since then, the town has a stock of coffins in hand; « Make your choice », they say ironically to visitors.

Elsewhere sixty inhabitants or so — old men, women, and children — have just been burned by yperite, which is one of the most awful inventions of the German war.

Work still goes on in that same town exposed to the poisoned vapours. And we were even able to take our American friends to a work-shop where good work is being done. It was the work-shop of one of those designers who, during the German occupation, incarnated the audaciously scornful protestation of Alsace, and revenged themselves by their wit, till the time came to revenge themselves by arms. There is keen pleasure in turning over these albums that uphold the oppressed, and seeing others made under the very noses of the Boches. These plates are arms, as well. The Alsatian caricature denounces, at the same time as it chastises, the great cause of the war — the colossal pride of the Germans.

Our friends from the United States have the pleasure of finding their own men in this sector too. There are Alsatian villages that are ring again with the sound of American voices. There pass huge lorries in which boys in khaki, clustering on the sides like sparrows on a branch, gaze wide-eyed at this old country so new for them, and chauffeurs with big spectacles and gloves with wide tops drive past impassively in their quivering side-cars, while lithe young riders gallop along with their feet in stirrups fitted with leather shields, calling back the memory of the vast prairies of the Far West.

And they are already known for their expeditiousness, of which the following example is told us. One of our officers could not find a motor for some urgent business. He asked the driver of a side-car to give him a lift. The latter agreed, but, when about to get in, the officer saw that the bottom of the side-car was full of water. The driver, informed of this, looked in, said calmly « All right », and, taking out his revolver, put a bullet through it. The water ran out, and away they went.

They do their police-work smartly, too. It is known that they have no special police. Turn and turn about, they take

the brassard and the trunchcon. And it appears that there is no joking with these improvised gendarmes. If orders are disobeyed, the punishment is meted out at once, quick as lightning. These Yanks remember from time to time that they are from the land of Judge Lynch...

All the same, they are the best of good fellows. That can be seen especially from their ways with children. The American is the big friend. He goes and hunts out the village youngsters to initiate them in the mysteries of baseball. In return, they teach him the French they have just learnt. It is a delightful sight to see a child of Alsace, in a field just won back, teaching French to the sons of Illinois or Massachusetts squatting down around him.

In one of the schools which the pupils have just left, the American General has set up his head-quarters. He receives us there, in these humble scholastic surroundings that he has changed as little as may be. He has pinned on a black-board the map of the sector which is to be entrusted to him, a map on which the net-work of trenches looks like the veins on the skin. But all around him there still hang on the wall pictures, recapitulatory tableaux, mottoes, and prescriptions, everything that the master sets before the eyes of his pupils to fix it in their hearts and minds. And here, between a « Declaration of the Rights of Man » and a picture preaching economy, is an engraving representing Rouget de Lisle declaiming the Marseillaise in Dietrich's house. Further on is a list framed in black: the list of the children of the place who have died for France. And however small it be, there are never less than thirty.

Ah! how right this general who receives us with eyes so keen and steady behind his tortoise-shell spectacles was to order that these pictures and lists should not be touched! It is enough to glance at them for the great debate to be as it were summed up for one. One sees there everything that bound

Alsace to France; common history and a common ideal. It is seen that in spite of 44 years' oppression, love has ever been stronger than time, stronger than the schlague, stronger than death.

The Americans have not been here for long. And yet in the shade of the old village church, not far from the monuments of the families Dietrich, Müller or Zizzelin, there is newly dug ground, there are foreign graves; on each of them there floats a little star-spangled flag. We think of the fathers and mothers so many thousands of leagues away from the unknown cemetery where their sons are sleeping...

In a lovely valley, there rise huge tents, like aeroplane sheds. And one of them is already full. With ashy drawn faces, boys, brothers of those we see on the road, so lithe, so gay, so healthy, are suffering there. And even more perhaps than the moaning of our brothers, the moaning of these foreigners wrings our hearts. And the words we heard fall from the lips of an old Alsatian woman keep ringing in our ears: « Just think, they have come from so far away ! »

Our allies have a fairly large number of wounded at present. For they are full of eagerness. They are new to the work. To waken up a sector, as they say, they have not their like.

And so when one is fond of a good sleep, one does not see them come without a lurking uneasiness. One knows quite well that by troublesome coups de main and stubborn bombardments, they will draw on their cantonments roaring reprisals. « But that makes no difference » says our good hostess in one of these villages: « We'll spend another fortnight in the cellars if need be, but we'll still be glad to have them. And we'll try to keep them from getting too home-sick, poor fellows ! »

One of the finest results of this Franco-American brotherhood is these Soldiers' Homes that the Y. M. C. A. in colla-

boration with our French societies has set up from one end of the front to the other. In a quiet corner there is something to read, writing materials, a piano, and a screen for a cinematograph. And these are priceless things.

One Home where we stop is situated in admirable scenery, behind a famous hill-top, below a road where the roaring motors pass, in the middle of those long pine-tree trunks the roots and head of which cannot be seen, and which are like the countless pillars of a huge cathedral, always full of rustling, and a murmuring like that of the sea. How sweet it must be to rest here after work and a night spent in the trenches !

The Home has two directors : a Frenchman who has lost an arm in the war, and has insisted on coming here so as to be as near his brothers who are still fighting as he can, and an American, disabled likewise, with his right hand paralysed by an accident during work. He has found in a post with the Y. M. C. A. the means of helping his fellow-countrymen and France at the front. They tell us how glad the soldiers of both nations are to meet in their hut, and how well they get on together.

We talk with some of the Americans who are eating a snack. And as one of them, who hails from Kansas, complains of having come so far for nothing, one of our officers advises him to practise patience. « It's all very well to go on ahead. But you must remember that a dead man is useless. Do not show yourself too openly. Do not follow a Boche anywhere. Look out for traps. And above all, listen to your officers. »

The man who speaks thus wears a black patch over his right eye, three chevrons for wounds, and has two palms and two stars on his Croix de Guerre. Young as he is, he is an old hand at war, and has the right to give advice. And his little speech is one of those that tell.

To make our adieu, we climb up to the top of the hill close by, where an observation post is hidden away as well as may be. How wonderful and pathetic the scenery is ! Two promontories close in the plain, which is as wide as a sea — two promontories over famous. And on the one as on the other, between the lines only a few score metres apart, thousands of corpses lie rotting, thousands of skeletons lie whitening. And no truce is possible for burying them. And before the fair form of Alsace lying stretched out before the eyes of the combatants, men are always on the qui-vive, and the anger of the two peoples, at these extreme points, ceases not thundering.

There they are then — it seems as if one would only have to stretch out one's hand to seize them as one gathers bunches of flowers in the plain — there they are, those charming towns that belong to us and have been waiting for us now for close on fifty years. So near and yet so far ! More than ever the invader lets his full weight fall upon them. He carries people away, sequesters them and imprisons them. And whilst behind us there rises from the valleys we have delivered a hymn of grateful joy, soaring upward with the smoke from the chimneys, we seem to hear a cry of agony, a desperate supplication swelling up from this magnificent plain that has become a field of martyrs.

« Come quickly, you who have been our brothers for all time, you our allies yesterday and the day before, all of you, soldiers of Liberty. Come quickly, so that at last we may have once more the right to dispose freely of ourselves, which is the source of the peace for which the whole world hungers. »

JEAN BRETON.

(*Trans. W. SAVAGE*).

